The Europe of Wandering Strangers—Creatively Viewed by an Estranged European Among Them,

or,

Danish Writer Homesteading Homelessness in Europe

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I

Movement, in almost every literal and figurative sense, is key to the performance art of author 1) Claus Beck-Nielsen *alias* 2) Das Beckwerk *alias* 3) Madame Nielsen, et al. *Claus Beck-Nielsen (1963-2001)*, subtitled *A Biography* and published post-mortem in 2003 by author 1), begins with the chapter, "Who Am I?"[1] and focuses on the title character walking out of his/her/their identity on the streets of Copenhagen, while one Claus Nielsen, who arrived there from Germany in 2000, leaves again, even "disappears," at book's end about one year and 200 pages later.

Between the book's covers, one (type of) identity subtly moves in and out of another in a manner that sets the stage for this author's/these authors' entire complex of identity mobility. Whether literally or figuratively, it is a plasticity that defines not only one identity's (dis) connection to another, as its "double," but also the literary output this composite enables overall. A compelling task facing the reader of the "Nielsen" authorship is thus to locate the Archimedean point from which the defining characteristics of its complexity can be identified. In my pursuit thereof, I'll be touching on traits of Europe's cultural and democratic crisis as well.

II

Part I of Das Beckwerk's five-part novel *Suverænen* (The Sovereign, 2008) takes off from the old world. As Rasmussen, along with Nielsen and their "box of Democracy," returns from a tour in chaotic Iraq, he reflects in Copenhagen's airport on the delusion underpinning the trip's display of the box as a facilitator of democracy. Nielsen, the *artist* of the project, believes he is more political than artistic, whereas Rasmussen maintains that political art in Denmark—and the West in general—is only for "self-direction and identity production" (Das Beckwerk 15). As one wandering possibility, this exemplary European and citizen of the world proves at odds with his own task.

Rasmussen's Iraqi journey, as a political artist, bordered on the catastrophic, so he headed for America to find his Utopia realized. Although democracy is nowhere universal, in America it's like an outpatient psychiatric clinic short of oxygen. There his goal proves a lost cause, so perhaps one should rather seek a place where one is rooted and from which one may long to get away—as opposed to being "a swirling universal ideal" doomed to catapulting oneself out of oneself, across the Earth, into Utopia. Meanwhile, Rasmussen's homeland is at a standstill and in decay, so his last word is "Ithaka" (Das Beckwerk 302). After this last breath of his, Nielsen despairingly copies Rasmussen's habits, including his way of resting like a corpse under a white sheet. With Rasmussen gone, Nielsen returns to Europe.

Toward the end of his life, Rasmussen more and more frequently substantiated the visions of his homeland retreat as Horne Land, and after Nielsen's return to Denmark, *his* narrative I is both taken in and scared by this reference. After first hoping it was merely a figment of Rasmussen's imagination, Nielsen comes to realize its geographical reality yet still postpones facing it. Nonetheless, coincidence takes him there, and although initially fearful that the actual place might discredit Rasmussen's memory of it, Nielsen soon begins to sense quite the opposite being the case, and so an Archimedean point *does* emerge—both for reliving and writing the existential history that he and Rasmussen shared and squabbled about. A real homecoming, both personally and artistically, is brought to fruition by this narrative voice as stated in the book's conclusion and practiced throughout the text preceding it:

> If there is any place in the world, or rather beyond it, a place so adequately distanced from it all that history can be written, then it is here. This is the land Outside, I thought. No more questions. This was the answer. Here I would settle down. No matter what. Take place, … And write. The Whole History. Yes, I thought, I have finally come home (Das Beckwerk 321).

Nielsen's movement on foot across the Middle East before crossing the Atlantic, and then again on foot across the US on the Pond's other side, finally seems fulfilled.

III

In 2016, twelve years after this homecoming, the author's identity has further transitioned, from das Beckwerk to Madame Nielsen, and 'her' genre output to an educational novel named *Invasionen: En fremmed i flygtningestrømmen* (The Invasion: A Stranger in the Tide of Refugees)—much in tune with refugees on the move now becoming the visual image of history's voice and the new framework for an educational journey across Europe, as "the history of humanity approaches its finish line and a new chapter in Europe's history is in the offing" (Nielsen 27).

Initially, Madame naïvely believes that "man, created to wander, can still walk through the world she herself has changed into an increasingly wild movement" (Nielsen 38). "She herself" wanders aimlessly and stops and reflects by the open sea on "Europe's border, one you never cross, one you go underneath and disappear into" until it absorbs you and "spits your stinking cadaver onto an accidental beach" (Nielsen 44). Having given up her spirit, she now considers "her life and movement … one great mistake, one can no longer wander through the world" (Nielsen 52-3, 64). At one point she comes to a halt, surrounded by the chaos of refugees as

> the only one who has nothing to do here. And feels at home … and is suddenly alien to herself. And likes it. The Excitement. Between myself and the alien. Within me. She feels herself exposed, all senses wide open … But why precisely here, on the border, by the border, in the borderland? It is here things happen, she thinks. What? History, the world's history, our history, everything's transition into something else (Nielsen 65).

Men of *Bildung*, Madame considers "a dying species … the real aliens in this history, travelers of another era, which closes behind them, no camp is awaiting them, nor any asylum, only death, oblivion, exit Europe" (Nielsen 66-7). The outskirts, or the periphery, is the world's new center, after the *Bildungsreisen* and the time when frightened humans did not get on the run (Nielsen 69-70). Madame lives in the age of paradoxes, when Europe's borders are closed to legal citizens with passports, and only refugees and the undocumented have permission to cross them (Nielsen 80).

Reality is the stream of refugees crossing Europe into the future, and Madame's rendition thereof amounts to fictions that interlink "things, views and voices in a progress that resembles a narrative, my history and yours" (Nielsen 119), signs of "European state power as violent powerlessness, a clumsy colossus on clay feet" (Nielsen 127). She accounts for this tortuous no-man's-land in the borderland (Nielsen 128) and spells out the laws of refugee streams, whose *movements* are their only identity, and whose *border movements* form the vivid democracy of the accidental (Nielsen 130-2). Not until Graz in Austria does she arrive at the EU of self-esteem, and although she herself is from nowhere and knows nobody, she is disgusted by her own disgust and repelled by repulsive humility (is it human or inhuman?) (Nielsen 138). A chaotic life without directions surrounds Madame (Nielsen 139-40).

All in all, the laws of Europe (Nielsen 163-7) are those of the borderland and identify a border that is not the site of thought, but of suspicion, and a site of revelation, but where the revealed is yet another veil. "The border is the place that is not a place" and where the power of the state is laid bare (as the power of violence as well as of incapacity):

> Where the border disappears, suddenly nobody can separate hope from nightmare or Utopia from a place that should not – never – have existed. … The border is the blind angle of the state, society, and the community; the border reveals truths and phenomena "we" don't want to face but prefer to believe are non-existent, though it also reveals what we couldn't dream of and hope for – i.e., what? (Nielsen 164-5).

In conclusion: "Am I then a refugee, says Madame. And wakes up" (Nielsen 167).

Her novel's epilogue depicts the end of her text as the end of the contemporary stream of refugees moving up through Europe (Nielsen 188). Yet, "that the stream was brought to a halt, that that was possible, *that* was merely a dream. It continues, along other routes, always slightly different, it will never end. Never? No, never" (Nielsen 189). The Invasion novel's last moment is "0:59. It is after midnight. Europe has gone to sleep" (Nielsen 189)—and its final chapter concludes: "The world is insane, we should cease to exist, but it is too late, tomorrow begins a new chapter of its history. Goodnight, Europe" (Nielsen 190). *Movement* has stalled, but only for a *moment* in history.

IV

To the question: who is this novel's Madame, really (Nielsen 180-1), the answer seems to be: not only a stranger, but the epitome of all the unknown humans depicted streaming across Europe in Madame's educational novel about this chapter in world history (Nielsen 184-8). Like these characters, the author is seeking a home in 'another' world but is chiefly locating home, both for them and herself, in the journey and search per

se, or more precisely: in the homelessness they somewhat share. It is like a mobile home, not on wheels but on feet. The question remains what its mobility entails, be it for her, her characters—and her readers.

In "The European Homelessness," a chapter in his *Forsømmelsernes bog* (*The Book of Neglect*, 2001), Nielsen's colleague, the novelist and culture critic Carsten Jensen, describes the entire "European house" as "a place where the refugee and the settled seem to melt together or at least share surfaces of contact: in a homelessness that goes too deep to be contradicted by data in the population registry" (Jensen 114). It seems an elusive and ambiguous scenario, and in Paul Auster's *Moon Palace*, Jensen himself sees the novel's protagonist addressing such homelessness as more than the "result of despair and weakened will. It also involves a metaphysical temptation" that makes him believe that surrendering to chaos in life might reveal some kind of "secret harmony" (Jensen 116) – much like the stimulation Jensen elsewhere sees emanating "from once rooted values that are now thriving best in the homes of fantasy and imagination" (Jensen 115).

That said, the homelessness at issue is far from cost free. In Don DeLillo's *Mao II* novel, one homeless character has typically "lost his humanity, simply because he has lost the possibility to retrieve and recognize himself in others" (Jensen 115). In fact, even the language of the homeless becomes homeless itself, "no longer a dwelling for anybody" (Jensen 117), and so "the homeless European—post the age of explorers—has replaced the goal-oriented move of the journey with a drifting around in the chaos of time and space." Like these fictional characters, we too, according to Carsten Jensen, may be facing a huge void and "a future that only we ourselves can fill and populate" (Jensen 118), situations altogether similar to the one envisioned more optimistically in the works of Claus Beck-Nielsen, Das Beckwerk, and Madame Nielsen.

For one thing, "writing must be nomadic. If the body stops moving, so does art," as Nielsen put it in an interview. Movement from one identity into another is no less crucial, and even moving into nothingness opens up new possibilities so long as others do the same. Short of that, becoming a woman proves the best option for Nielsen and the drive behind walking on obsessively—only short of becoming an antique idiot, who speaks truths that others prefer to ignore (Dressler-Bredsdorff). A reviewer of the author's later book about *Alverdens-vandringerne* (The World-Wanderings) from 2019 notes that "wandering to her is a goal in itself: She falls into this state of mind, out of herself, slightly ecstatic" and does so because her mission, no matter its expression, is to transform the world into true writing. Much like the traveling Hans Christian Andersen, "she takes place," in every sense of that phrase (Rothstein). As she herself has put it, calming down in stability is obviously tempting, yet "I will never calm down. This is life and great literature: we never come home. … The world is not either-or. The world is both-and, and one can be both man and woman, human and animal, stone and biology. And so can my writing," which challenges especially "Europeans, who insist upon understanding and illuminating everything in the world" to instead, like a lover, appreciate the magic of duplicity (Tschermerinsky).

Secondly, the intricate connection between movement and writing, reflected equally in Madame's wandering and discursive practices, makes her the author of impossibility, as Mikkel Krause Frantzen pointed out in his address at an award ceremony for her novel about Romania's dictator Ceaucescu. However, like Nielsen's activities overall, the impossible is a double-edged sword in her hand, stressing also what is most necessary. Danish theologian K.E. Løgstrup might have said that Nielsen keeps impossibility intact—as a possibility (Frantsen). Or, in Derrida's terms, as a ghostly event (Rösing). Besides all its other implications, the impossible even reflects the Utopia that stood out as the ghostly mix of the real and the illusional, if not delusional, in Nielsen's novels about democracy traversing the US and refugees traversing Europe, respectively.

Which brings me to my third point about this author's take on—or being taken on by – movements, be they of democracy or refugees, or travel and identity. In addition to my account for these matters in his/her works, comments are implied in such scholarly titles as "Is Nielsen a ghost?" (Rösing) and "Precarious Life—Nielsen's Search for a Life beyond Identity" (Schultz). Writes the latter: "Madame Nielsen is not in the first place a queer identity. Rather, she is an aesthetic device, an exploitation of the female as a tool for transformation, or even a machine that may create new possible forms of existence" (Schultz).[2]

V

Though it may feel uplifting, in a time of simplistic confrontations on key cultural matters, to have someone like Nielsen illuminate the dystopia that may well ensue if we remain locked in polarization instead of following her roadmap, the question remains how well her artistic approach may resonate beyond literary and cultural studies—and reach into political and social sciences not to mention into social and political life itself. Let me conclude with a few pieces of evidence in that regard.
How does the cultural identity of a foreign wanderer through Europe square with that of the continent's settled people. The Arabic film director Omar Shargawi's answer

to journalist Layal Freije is telling. The longer Shargawi has lived in Denmark, the more ambiguous his identity has become, and the more at home and homeless he feels both here and there: "It is like the more integrated in a society you become, and the more balance you find between your "innate" and adopted culture and religion, the more your adopted society accuses you of not being Danish enough." It makes him "despondent and inclined to pack up and leave. Once again" (Shargawi).

On the larger scale, this disturbing duplicity shows in a whole country, like Denmark, as well. In 2015 one scholar put it this way: "It is a great schism in Danish self-comprehension that we have taken a lead in third world support and international solidarity, on the one hand, although shown to be very troubled by immigration, on the other. The result has contributed to the overheated debate" (Termansen). Or in the words of a colleague cited in the same article: "In literature about international relations since the 1970s, Denmark is described as the humane internationalist. This ended about ten years ago." As Madame Nielsen crisscrossed Europe from its epicenters to its borders and back again, he/she envisioned both an innovated and enriched continental identity, which has proven to be as problematic as it is promising. Its future is still at issue, or as the author and archeologist Jeanette Varberg in 2015 put it in an article titled "Man is born a wanderer": "The question is if the Europe we know today … will be recognizable in five years. Can major sweeping changes be avoided? I find it hard to imagine. The question is whether Europe will prove weakened or strengthened afterwards." The answer keeps blowing in the wind.

ENDNOTES

[1] This and subsequent translations from Danish are all mine.

[2] This reading corresponds well with Nielsen's interview with Marie Nyeng: "Jeg siger tit: Kald mig den eller det, eller hun eller han. Det er ikke vigtigt, bare du behandler mig godt" (Nyeng 30).

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